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SUBJECT: HE'S GOT ALL THE MARBLES: WHY ABSTENTIONISM SELLS

REF: A. CARACAS 01262

[1](#)B. CARACAS 00735

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Classified By: Robert Richard Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) While the December presidential election is still months away, massive abstention still remains a possibility. Convincing defeatist, suspicious, and fatigued voters to turn out will depend on conditions granted by the National Electoral Council (CNE); the selection of a unified opposition candidate; the rhetoric and behavior of President Hugo Chavez; and, to a lesser extent, the presence of international observers. Abstentionism among the Chavistas, caused either by triumphalism or apathy, is a serious concern for Chavez. The opposition faces a different set of issues, as abstentionists back strategies as foolish as discrediting the electoral process in hopes of a political crisis or as calculating as skipping the election in preparation for a hoped for though not immediate non-democratic end to Chavez. While these strategies might make sense to informed Venezuelans, explaining abstentionism internationally will be difficult if not impossible. End summary.

Abstentionism Now Part of the Political Landscape

[1](#)2. (C) After at least 75 percent of voters stayed home during the legislative elections of December 2005, abstentionism remains a critical element in the upcoming December 3 presidential elections. This cable does not seek to game out the possible scenarios for abstentionism; however, we do believe there is an even chance that mass abstentionism could be triggered in the run-up to the election. President Chavez' preference, of course, is for a total re-legitimation

by defeating a weak opposition candidate and achieving his prophesied 10 million votes (or, failing that, a landslide margin). Outside of that ideal scenario for Chavez is the unlikely but potential possibility of a strong opposition candidate who motivates opposition voters and forces the Chavista machinery to ramp up campaign efforts, including resorting to systemic fraud to enhance Chavez' margin. Finally, and perhaps worse for Chavez, there is the possibility the opposition candidate(s) pull out, leaving Chavez with at best a plebiscite on his rule or, worse, a postponed election. Chavez has threatened in this case to convert the election into a referendum to grant him indefinite re-elections, but the threat has not shaken opposition leaders.

13. (C/NF) What are the factors that would affect abstention rates? We rank-ordered the top four factors:

-- Unfair Electoral Conditions. Despite a facelift on the CNE board of directors, the electoral authority is run by the same Boli-crats from the last election. The electoral registry is the biggest hurdle to participation, with more than half of the entries lacking addresses and therefore suspect. The CNE's mischievous maneuvering to keep independent universities out of an outside audit of the registry is a good indication that opposition concerns over the registry will not be seriously addressed. A second dealbreaker would be CNE insistence on procedures that would not guarantee the integrity and secrecy of the vote.

-- A Credible Alternative to Chavez. The three serious opposition candidates have agreed that only one of them will go to the election with Chavez. Two of the candidates, Manuel Rosales and Julio Borges, have agreed to participate in a primary in August, while Teodoro Petkoff remains a

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holdout. If a single candidate emerges from the primary process, he may inspire more opposition voters to turn out in December.

-- Chavez' Behavior and Rhetoric. Chavez will harass the opposition using his diverse toolkit of state powers. A Chavez-inspired decision at the Supreme Court (TSJ), for example, might keep Manuel Rosales from giving up his governor's seat in Zulia to run for president. Chavez also likes to bully opposition voters and make them wonder whether their vote truly is secret. Chavez may have learned from the National Assembly elections that his constant stick-poking of the opposition could lead to their withdrawal. (We suspect, however, he has not.) The Chavistas have already unfurled their anti-abstentionist propaganda, publicly claiming that the U.S. Embassy is directing a secret abstentionist campaign. (Note: We are not.)

-- International Observers. The presence and actions of observers speak directly to issues of voter confidence. While we suspect that a series of mediocre missions in recent years has probably eroded the effect of and public support for international observers, they may still have an impact in Venezuela. The Bolivarians have perfected their handling of observers, displaying courtesy and openness to their faces but applying selective pressure tactics during the elections and later excoriating them for political bias when after-action reports are issued. And, during last year's electoral crisis, the observers were ineffective in curbing abstention by keeping the opposition in the race. In short, observers in the presidential elections are a wild card that may influence abstention.

Chavista Abstention

14. (C) While the opposition is plagued by a host of variables when it comes to getting its people to the polls, we also

note that Chavismo is not immune. Most Venezuelans believe Chavez will win, so what's the point? Since candidate Chavez ran for office in 1998, there have been eight national elections and three protracted signature collection processes. Having won all of the National Assembly, the overwhelming majority of governor and mayor contests, and a constitutional referendum, rank-and-file Chavistas see little need to cast votes. Aside from voter fatigue, there is also mounting evidence that the Chavistas are increasingly frustrated by the Bolivarians' failure to deliver after seven years on the job. So far, Chavez is able to deflect criticism to his underlings while maintaining his own popularity. This leaves the Chavistas with a challenge of motivating an apathetic base. This is probably at least a partial explanation of his push for the 10 million votes. If past is prologue, we can expect Chavez' voter incentives to include substantially increased populist spending and benefits with all the usual strings attached to voting for Chavez. Of course, the Chavistas will also threaten their base with removal from positions and social program roles if they fail to turn out. This is no idle threat to anti-Chavistas, made evident by the BRV's abuse of election and "mission" data via the Tascon List and Programa Maisanta to cut government opponents out of state employment and largesse.

Abstentionism as a Political Strategy

15. (C) Since most Venezuelans think of themselves as democrats, we still perceive a natural proclivity toward voting. There is an array of opinion within the opposition, however, about how far to take this devotion to democracy in the face of an opponent who does not follow the same rules. We generalize these opinions into three groups:

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-- The Thumbsuckers. A minority hardcore opposition faction sees no point in trying to compete with Chavez electorally because, given his past record, they see no possibility that he will make it a fair fight. They prefer to talk about "organizing the resistance" rather than mounting a presidential campaign. Their strategy is to abstain so that President Chavez is forced into an extreme position that will touch off a political crisis. Few have any idea on where that crisis might lead, but Venezuelans know their political system is cataclysmic, with big changes often coming rapidly and with little warning. In this group we would place groups and individuals like Oswaldo Alvarez Paz and his tiny Alianza Popular (ref a), National Resistance Command (ref b), Antonio Ledezma, and Tulio Alvarez. However, we bet this minority group gets far more air time from the private media in relation to their effective political and electoral weight.

-- The Condition Seekers. The majority of abstention-leaning groups would probably participate if the BRV granted adequate conditions. They understand the incumbent government will always have a natural advantage, but they cannot justify participating with such blatant excesses such as the suspect electoral registry. The irony of their situation is that they find themselves demanding that the CNE grant conditions that are already clear legal obligations -- essentially negotiating which rules by which the referee will abide. In this group we would put the majority of political parties, with the exception of Accion Democratica, and the electoral NGO Sumate. Unfortunately, this group constantly contradicts and reverses itself publicly because it is forced to react daily to the BRV's electoral zig-zags.

-- The Pragmatists. Chavez is a dictator who will not be defeated electorally, this group contends. His sins and shortcomings will eventually catch up to him, and he will fall from power extra-constitutionally within a couple of years, they assert. Why not organize to be ready to offer a

political solution in that eventuality? In this group we put the leadership of the AD party (though many rank-and-file members are in the second group and may end up backing Governor Rosales). AD Secretary General Henry Ramos was an early critic of the CNE this year, though he speaks less frequently today. Also within this group we might include shadowy political figures such as former Chavez mentor Luis Miquilena, who has practically no public profile but maintains strong contacts within business and political sectors. We have no evidence that these groups are currently plotting coups, but they do seem convinced that conditions for a coup or some other non-democratic shift will eventually materialize in the months and even years after the presidential elections.

No International Marketability

¶6. (C/NF) We note that few of the opposition's arguments are compelling to foreign governments or observers. It is easy to dismiss the opposition's abstentionist line as a loser's strategy. While this is a valid critique of at least the "Thumbsuckers," it is not a fair generalization of the rest of the opposition. Understanding the history and intricacies of Venezuela's recent electoral battles is no small time investment, and the international definitions used to discuss such themes are not applicable here. For example, the recent TSJ opinion that validates the automated voting system over a

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manual count -- a frequent opposition demand -- seems reasonable but fails to note that the same TSJ is completely subservient to Chavez to the point that its members chanted jubilantly in his favor when the President visited them earlier this year. The opposition is not savvy or organized enough to clarify these fine points effectively to international audiences. This causes us to suspect their abstentionist arguments will not draw much sympathy from

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other governments or international groups.

Comment

¶7. (C) Abstention is the unofficial third candidate in the presidential race. Both sides will have a chance to influence its size and impact. For Chavez, he will have to find the right mix of carrots and sticks to maximize voter turnout while still guaranteeing an overwhelming victory. For the opposition, a unified candidate will need opposition voters to participate if he hopes to put in a decent showing. He may also count on disaffected Chavistas staying home and thereby robbing Chavez of his coveted 10 million votes. For now, however, it is too soon to predict the role of abstention in the December election.

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